

What's happened to the suburb they called Crestwood Heights? Robert Olson



Artist Duncan Macpherson offers his idea of what happened when university sociologists penetrated the wilds of Forest Hill's 'broadloom jungle'

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An inquisitive study of Toronto's Forest Hill Village set the nation whispering. Now that this legendary bastion of wealth and dignity has got used to being famous--What's happened to the suburb they called Crestwood Heights?

Until a little more than a year ago Forest Hill Village was notable chiefly as a Toronto suburb where twenty thousand people were proud to live because it suggested they were successful enough to afford the city's most expensive district. In remoter Canada the name Forest Hill was a little better known, perhaps, than such substantial Toronto environs as Mimico and Etobicoke, but less as a real place with people and problems than as a symbolic term like "mink" and "limousine."

Then overnight the prosperous privacy of the Village was rudely invaded and Forest Hill found itself being pointed to as a somewhat tarnished image of all Canada's wealthy residential districts —with some unworthy characteristics all its own. To this day Forest Hill still isn't sure what it did, or failed to do, to deserve sudden headlines and wide notoriety.

The headlines came, not from some juicy revelation of adult delinquency (Forest Hill residents are law-abiding to the point of stuffiness, at any rate inside their own boundaries), but from the unsensational prose of a sociological study.

The sociologists of the University of Toronto who penetrated Forest Hill's "broadloom jungle" and wrote a book about its population's manners and mores under the thinly disguised title *Crestwood Heights* have denied that their report justified such headlines as "Children Spoiled by Rich Forest Hill Parents" and "Find Mental-Health Problems Prevalent."

In vain the sociologists pointed out that the book was the result of a research program conducted in Forest Hill's five schools as a pilot project aimed at improving the mental-health services for all Canada. In Forest Hill the sociologists planned to set up within a school system of manageable size a model mental-hygiene service that would test established methods and perhaps point the way to better procedures. Equally in vain, the sociologists insisted they had chosen Forest Hill schools for the project, not because mental disturbance was unusually prevalent among the village's "overprivileged children," but because Forest Hill parents in general took an enlightened rather than a frightened attitude toward their children's mental hygiene. Because they were enlightened and because they could afford it. Forest Hill parents and children had probably spent more time in personality tests and on psychiatrists' couches than any comparable group in Canada. Even before the sociologists came in, the mental-health services among Forest Hill's fewer than two thousand pupils was rated among the best in the country. The report named Eddie (Dynamite) James on facts and impressions that sociologists, psychiatrists, social workers, psychologists, adult-educators and anthropologists numbering between twenty and thirty at various times, collected as a by-product of a combined service, training and research program in Forest Hill. The project, financed mainly by a federal-government grant, and directed by Professor John Seeley with a University of Toronto committee, lasted from 1948 to 1953. Teachers from every province joined it for a year each, to learn, from special courses and by assisting in the Forest Hill clinics and classrooms, how to improve the cooperation between teachers, doctors and psychologists at their own schools. Reports on their practical experiences were incorporated into *Crestwood Heights*.

A study group of about thirty home-and-school mothers helped with research into the community and offered themselves as research subjects. One was so enthused she went on to study sociology at the University of Toronto. The women continue to meet, though the book made them feel rather like the martyrs who let themselves be bitten by

anopheles mosquitoes for the benefit of science. They refer to themselves now as the “Crestfallen Heights Old Girls’ Association.”

Educators in Forest Hill entered the project because it appeared the best, and least expensive, way to gain improved mental-health services. The few village officials who realized that a book would be published as a result of the study thought, as one of them put it, “it would be a royal commission sort of report that nobody would read.”

Instead, newspapers got wind of “something sensational” and the result was the publication of reports that, the book’s authors claimed, turned a sympathetic study into an attack on the community by picking out “exciting bits,” such as the description of Forest Hill homes as “cold . . . lacking in life. . . looking like department stores,” or an interpretation of some statistics as meaning that one Forest Hill child in five needed psychiatric attention.

Impromptu Forest Hill stories sprouted across Canada. Some were derisive. One told about a woman whose fanatic devotion to broadloom caused her to lay it “wall to wall”—right into the fireplace. Others were censorious: tales of rich children dwelling like mushrooms in the basements of their immaculate homes, or of “that school where the kids walk around naked.” Many more were unprintable.

The immediate result was to stimulate a demand for Crestwood Heights, which the University of Toronto Press, having two thousand copies ready for Canada—a healthy number for a 505-page, \$6.50 sociological work—arranged to meet with another fifteen hundred. In the Toronto Public Libraries for half a year the book headed the list of nonfiction in demand, and for two months requests for it were more frequent than for anything on the fiction list as well. In Forest Hill, “that book about us” became the prime conversation piece.

Forest Hill school children, baffled at first by the odd stories in the papers, eventually became hilarious. Five would pose together and ask, “Which of the five is in need of psychiatric treatment?”

Apart from its sociological analyses (which many villagers found frankly unexciting precisely because it was scientific and unsensational), the book interested Forest Hill because it was the first time residents had been treated as a whole, had been shown to have anything in common.

For Forest Hill is not a community with an old tradition, with its own roots and definitions. There is no change in the look of the houses at its fringes, and businesses over a mile away exploit the prestige of its name. A stranger does not notice where the boundaries are. But the Villagers know and display a fierce stubbornness when their identity and rights seem to be in danger of being forgotten. When Metropolitan Toronto, for example, was prepared to shoulder aside Forest Hill's objections and fluoridate the water supply it shares with the suburb, the Village fought the giant's steamrolling tactics up to the Supreme Court, and won.

Residential building lots in the Village have been, when available, the most expensive in the Toronto area. The asking price for the last home site on the market (fifty by a hundred and fifty feet) is more than thirty thousand dollars. What best shows the high cost of land is the scarcity of space for public use. There are three small but pleasant parks and a few "parkettes"—tag ends of lots, too small for building use.

Although the Village is ringed by churches and synagogues, there are only two churches—a United and a Roman Catholic—and a Sunday school within its boundaries. (The Village boundary line runs through the Anglican Grace-Church-on-the-Hill, thus placing the Sunday school within the Village, the church proper, without.) Theatres, hospitals, liquor stores, industries and nearly all the offices in which Forest Hill incomes are earned, lie outside. The nearest taverns are far away, down in the city. All the remaining vacant space in the Village is allocated for ninety-three new houses, fourteen apartment buildings, two fourplexes and six stores.

Forest Hill is the only municipality in the Toronto area where building plans must be drawn by a registered architect and passed by a municipal committee, which can reject them if they don't "blend in with the existing atmosphere." Sir Henry Pellatt's amusing horror six blocks south. Casa Loma, would never have got a permit. Almost any work of a Wright, Neutra or other leader in architectural design would also have been excluded. House elevations facing the street must be two stories, in a conventional style. Swimming pools are banned because of possible insect-breeding, danger to children, and noise: only one is in use, built before municipal regulations were applied.

Estates in the district are rich, not gaudy. There are no spectacular vistas and the manor-house residences in the old, richest section have modest gardens if any, though trees from the old forest are intensely cherished. One resident at the southeast fringe won three thousand dollars damages when her favorite tree was killed by contractors building an apartment house on the next lot. In the northern section, built up mostly within the last ten years, tender saplings are carefully nursed along. In this area the new

houses are almost as wide as their lots, but that width includes a garage large enough to house what other Torontonians refer to enviously as “Forest Hill Fords” — Chryslers, Lincolns or Cadillacs.

Eight of the twenty-six Rolls-Royce owners in greater Toronto live in Forest Hill. The number of authentic millionaires in residence was estimated before the war at twenty-seven. The postwar boom has undoubtedly increased that number but it is not always easy to identify millionaires in these days of complex taxation and capital-gains deals. On the other hand, a number of roomers slipped into Forest Hill homes during the war-time housing emergency and municipal authorities are still trying to get them out.

A few rural-looking bungalows survive from before the Village was incorporated in 1923. John Rohen, the last of the earlier community of twenty-one hundred who still lives in one of these, says the Village was founded by working people. Then “the rich man followed the poor man in.” He stays on and maintains the original way of life, including the sole outdoor privy in the region, although he has been offered around ten thousand dollars for his twenty-five-foot lot, which he bought a half century ago for three hundred dollars. The locality agrees with him— “High and dry, the healthiest part of the world.”

For more recent residents the cottages are landmarks to forget, like the CNR belt line that still crosses the area. Rohen thinks the place has declined from the period when “everybody was neighbors,” mainly through the middle-class influx of the last sixteen years. “Before that, there was a better class of people,” he says. The millionaires came mostly before the provincial government took the right to tax incomes away from the municipalities in 1934, when high taxes in Toronto were causing them to seek a handy refuge, an economic Monaco or Bermuda close to their work. The prudent and industrious men who withdrew to Forest Hill when it enjoyed village tax rates set the tone that has prevailed there since. The district has never been the preserve of the idle or eccentric rich.

The longtime leading citizen is the well-known philanthropist, Sigmund Samuel. John David Eaton, head of the mercantile empire his grandfather founded, lives a block from Samuel; across the street from Eaton, repeating the downtown vis-à-vis of their two huge stores, is Edgar Burton, president of Simpson's. They are surrounded by the homes of what is known as “the managerial level,” plus the residences of scores of directors of mining, oil and business enterprises. Doctors and lawyers abound.

There are a few birds of a different feather, like Johnny Wayne and Frank Shuster, the radio and TV comic team; Lome Greene, who is Wayne's next-door neighbor, and Foster Hewitt. Actors, writers and artists are relatively scarce for the probable reason that they can't afford it. "Neither can we," Shuster adds.

Like most adults in Forest Hill. Wayne and Shuster came from less-favored sections. Shuster, who settled near his partner after a harrowing experience in a northern Toronto suburb, recalls, "I used to join a smoke-filled southbound convoy every morning. Now I'm ten minutes from the studio. This is the closest I could get downtown and still live in the manner to which I hope to become accustomed."

The authors of Crestwood Heights say much the same in sociological language when they describe Forest Hill as "far less what the world is like, and far more what men say it should be like, or hope it will be like."

To which Villagers in general say, "amen." They find themselves less in agreement, though, with some other aspects of the study. The book regarded as "symptoms" some of the characteristics in which the community took most pride. For example, the parents' desire to obtain the best for their children, by turning them over to teaching specialists, recreation directors, psychologists and other assorted experts was regarded by the sociologists, the parents read, as an indication that they—the parents—were

unsure of their own standards and therefore anxious to let others take the responsibility.

What seems to have irritated the Villagers most was the implication that the Forest Hill house was, first, an emblem of status and, second, a place to live in. One sociological interviewer said he sometimes had to wait while his hostess whisked the plastic coverings off the furniture, in rooms often "reminiscent of a series of department-store windows." The book reported that the children were often banished to regions farther back, or below.

The sociologists interpreted this as a method of protecting the house from romping children, but the Villagers maintain that their houses happen to be large enough to allow children their own play space. Domestic help is relatively scarce (although it's the last considerable area where there are servants in Ontario, and the Village has become a mecca for European girls seeking to get established in their new homeland by hiring out as domestics), hence the plastic furniture covers as a work-saving device. A few houses are large enough not only for children's rooms, but for plastic-covered parlors and ordinary lived-in living rooms.

The book examined a growing dependency of Forest Hill residents on “experts” who regulate their conduct. It saw dangers in this both for the layman and the expert. Experts invited in to expound the book to home-and-school meetings emphasized that the situation had gone to extremes. “We even have experts to tell us how to love our children!” one exclaimed. Everyone concerned seems baffled, for as far as they can see, the laymen can detach themselves from one set of experts only by transferring their dependence to another set.

Caution after the storm

In Crestwood Heights the importance of various professional guides in the community is understandable, for where most of the adults are shedding the customs of a lower economic level, “ideology, speech, sometimes food habits, and preferences in decor, must be made over with relative suddenness and in the absence of unmistakable clues as to the behavior to be adopted.”

A milkman who delivers in the Village says he hardly ever sees his customers’ children. “They get rid of them,” he says. Forest Hill mothers contend they send three-year-old children to nursery school not because the children are a nuisance around the house, but because they learn more in class than at any mother’s knee.

Since the Crestwood Heights report a person seeking interviews in Forest Hill is likely to be met with cautious politeness. But it is clear that in Forest Hill backfence gossip has been reduced to a minimum, and there is no cracker-barrel set. The social clubs to which Villagers belong are all outside the Village and are chiefly places useful for keeping appointments and consolidating business contacts. The main contact between neighbors seems to be on committees that meet for various purposes by formal arrangements made in advance.

Some young parents in Forest Hill belong to “leadership training groups.” At least one of these studied Crestwood ^ Heights. The members complained that although the book convinced them something was wrong it did not tell them what to do.

They decided, moreover, that the sociologists tended to find psychological significances where none existed. For instance, in discussing the name of the community the book said: “The name suggests, as it was clearly meant to do, the sylvan, the natural and romantic, the lofty and serene, the distant but not withdrawn; the suburb that looks out upon, and over the city, not in it or of it, but at its border and on its crest.” But the name

Forest Hill was chosen in the last century by John Wickson for his farm near the present Eglinton Avenue, simply because it had trees and was on a hill, the highest in the Toronto area.

A man who has worked in the Village and observed its ways for twenty years said recently, "Forest Hill is known for what it was, not for what it is." Most of the residents moved in, when they found they could afford to, at least partly to acquire what the Village symbolized to them.

A considerable number of Villagers find this symbol in the pleasantly materialistic interior of a food store that Forest Hill boasts is unique, a gourmet's delight named Paul's French Food shop. The interior is a small temple of gastronomy, lined with gleaming jars, pots and tins, offering fresh and cooked products from Europe and the United States in refrigerated showcases and displaying in a kind of glass fountain in the centre a variety of hors d'oeuvres prepared on the premises.

Owners of groceries and delicatessens come to take notes and try to copy, but the feature they cannot duplicate is the proprietor's thirty-five years as a chef in Swiss, French and Canadian clubs and luxury hotels. Paul Monnin and his partner, his wife, do not advertise or deliver. Most of their regular customers first came in to buy one item tasted at another customer's house, and were attracted by other foods on view. For those to whom the more exotic desserts are strange names, Monnin has colored photographs to help them select their orders. He will prepare only as much as he can supervise himself and often has to turn down orders. "We don't want to become millionaires," he remarks. "We want to enjoy life."

Part of this objective they achieve by living seventeen blocks from the Village, thus joining the minority who reverse the usual Forest Hill tide by working in the Village and living outside. On the other hand, the Village has not got room for all who would like to live there. In the past five years, though, Forest Hill has managed to increase its population by one fourth, a much lower percentage rate than mushrooming North York, its neighbor, but, surprisingly, a greater rate of increase than Metropolitan Toronto's overall increase of one fifth. Some twenty thousand people live rather uncluttered lives in the Village's nine hundred and forty-eight acres.

The opening of the northern terminus of the Toronto subway in 1954 at Eglinton Avenue, the main east-west thoroughfare of the Village, brought urban bustle to the area. The original movement to Forest Hill was northward, by people who wanted to get out of the city; now, real-estate agents say, it is southward, by people who have tried the

outskirts and want to get back in. Apartment dwellers, a negligible part of the population when the Crestwood Heights study was made, have increased to about one quarter, mostly during the last three years. The Jewish proportion of the community, which was 10.96 percent in 1941 and 39.68 percent in 1951, has risen to more than half.

In the Village a man's religion, like his politics, is not taken into account. Crestwood Heights noted a greater gulf between male and female attitudes than between Jew and Gentile. Village councilor Bradford Heintzman remarks, "One of the things that makes Forest Hill unique is the wonderful cooperation between Jews and Gentiles. My wife at home-and-school club and I on the council are working with Jews all the time: the difference between Jew and Gentile never arises as a problem." Some Gentiles have moved out of Forest Hill because of the increased Jewish proportion, not because of friction but because the unfamiliar sensation of being in a minority was uncomfortable.

Political and social turbulence from the main currents of national life is subdued in Forest Hill. The typical Villager is interested in what is practical and immediate. The issues dividing the community at the moment are whether or not to install sidewalks on some streets that have been kept, until now, looking quasi-rural, and whether the district can afford a children's library.

Recently there were opposing campaigns, one for a library and the other for a more expensive artificial-ice rink. The rink won. A resident who deplores the fact that Forest Hill is the only Toronto municipality without a children's library, calls the Village the "English-speaking world's poorest community for library facilities—an intellectual desert."

By and large, though, the people of Forest Hill are not very different from other Canadians. They make good—or certainly inoffensive — neighbors. And they are generous. A former chairman of the Red Feather drive for Toronto says no Canadian community gives more freely. The municipality lends help to others as a matter of course when the calamity of fire, drought, Hood or hurricane strikes. (Somehow Forest Hill is never similarly afflicted.)

Every prospect in the Village is moderately pleasing. But in its total impression it seems a sad place. One sardonic observer of Village life calls it "spring water, chlorinated." The Villagers' social activity has the impeccable gracelessness of people who count while they dance. They are good people, but for no very appealing reasons. They are a little reminiscent of the Rich Ruler in the New Testament, the man who had kept all the

commandments from his youth up. and who turned away sorrowing when he was advised to give away all his goods.

Nobody has suggested anything so drastic for Forest Hill Village. ★